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HALF-HOURS AT HELLES

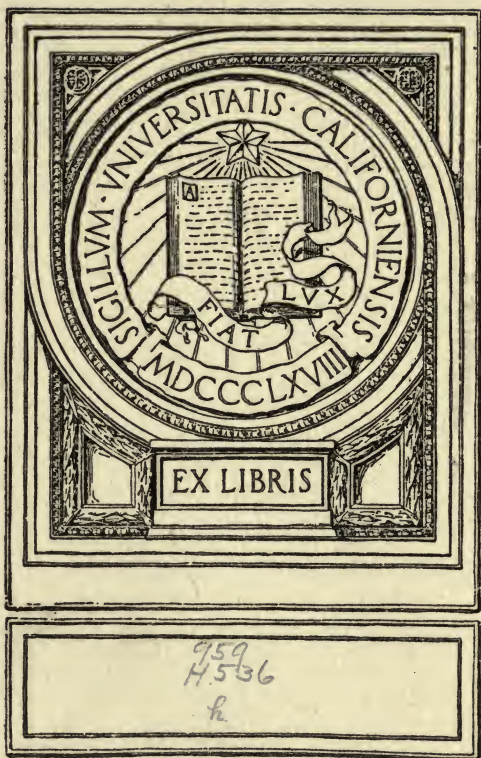
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A.P. HERBERT

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HALF-HOURS

AT

HELLES

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HALF-HOURS AT HELLES

BY

A. P. HERBERT



Oxford

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Contents

HALF-HOURS AT HELLES.

	PAGE
DEDICATION - - - - -	I
TWITTING THE TURK, I - - - - -	3
TWITTING THE TURK, II - - - - -	5
ON 'STANDING TO' - - - - -	8
RUM - - - - -	11
DIGGING. A SONG OF THE SPADE - - - - -	14
TO JAMES, ON HIS APPOINTMENT TO THE STAFF - - - - -	18
THE BATHE - - - - -	20
THE DUD - - - - -	21
IN RESERVE - - - - -	25
THROUGH THE GATE OF HORN - - - - -	27
THE PARALYSIS OF THE TENTH PLATOON - - - - -	29
THE SCHOOL FOR SAINTS - - - - -	31
THE PARCEL - - - - -	33
THE HAZARDS OF HOME - - - - -	35
THE ILLUSION - - - - -	37
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EVACUATION - - - - -	40
THE DUG-OUT - - - - -	43
'COLD FEET' - - - - -	45

DEPÔT DAYS.

THE QUARTERMASTER - - - - -	49
THE OLD SOLDIER - - - - -	51
THE ADJUTANT - - - - -	53
THE SOLDIER'S SPRING - - - - -	55
THE DRAFT - - - - -	57
EYE-WASH - - - - -	60
THE WORLD SET FREE - - - - -	62

MOST of these verses have already appeared in *Punch*, and I am indebted to the proprietors of that paper for their courtesy in giving me special permission to reprint at this time.

A. P. H.

DEDICATED
TO
LIEUT.-COLONEL LESLIE WILSON, D.S.O., M.P.,
AND THE
OFFICERS AND MEN
OF THE
HAWKE BATTALION, R.N.D.

Dedication

*THINK not, if in these lays
The singer seeks for smiles,
That he forgets the unsmiling days
Beyond the Aegean Isles;
Think not he now pretends
That HELLES hours were sweet,
Think not he wrongs the buried friends
We left at ACHI'S feet.*

*This is the Fourth of June.
Think not I never dream
The noise of that infernal noon,
The stretchers' endless stream,
The tales of triumph won,
The night that found them lies,
The wounded wailing in the sun,
The dead, the dust, the flies.*

*The flies! oh God, the flies
That soiled the sacred dead.
To see them swarm from dead men's eyes
And share the soldier's bread!
Nor think I now forget
The filth and stench of war,
The corpses on the parapet,
The maggots in the floor.*

DEDICATION

*But if in England's host
Men suffered undismayed,
And tried to smile and smiled the most,
When they were most afraid,
And laughed before the grave,
And jested in their pain,
Herein, maybe, the living brave
Shall hear them laugh again.*

JUNE 4, 1916.

Twitting the Turk—I.

THE Turk, he is an honest man,
And fights us fair and true,
But we annoy him all we can
As we are paid to do ;
We find him strangely reconciled
It's very hard to *keep* him riled ;
And things that once just made him wild
He takes a liking to.

The bully tin no more insults,
The Libby gives no grief,
That used to soar from catapults
And biff the shocked Redif ;
At first it gave him quite a turn,
The flight of that innocuous urn,
And then he spoiled the whole concern
By gobbling up the beef.

Yet when the cruder kind of wheeze
No longer irritates,
There's one that never fails to tease
His friends across the Straits,
Where many a Moslem scans our slopes
(With now and then some cramp, one hopes,
From looking long through telescopes)
And simply hates and hates.

TWITTING THE TURK—I

We go and bathe, in shameless scores,
Beneath his baleful een,
Disrobe, unscathed, on sacred shores
And wallow in between ;
Nor does a soldier there assume
His university costume,
And though it makes the Faithful fume
It makes the Faithless clean.

Ay, all our arts have some reward,
But this I think's the peach,
For man can bear the invader's horde,
That riots in his reach,
That raids his roost in armed swarms
Or swamps his citadels with storms,
But not their nude insulting forms
A-bathing off his beach.

Twitting the Turk—II.

WITH faces flushed and eyes like wine
The men sat mute along the line,
And some polemical design
Was palpably in view;
A flare soared sudden through the murk;
They turned unflinching towards the Turk
And shouted all they knew.

No ordered cheer, but each man cried
Some sound on which he most relied,
Or just invoked the Soccer side
Of which he once was proud;
A milkman happily 'Milk-o'd,'
Myself I simply said 'Well rowed!'
But said it very loud.

A wilder din you will not meet;
It hit the hills, it shook the Fleet,
And many a brave heart dropped a beat
To hear that hideous choir,
While the pale Turk, with lips tight set,
Peered out across the parapet
And opened rapid fire.

TWITTING THE TURK—II.

For it was clear the Christian cur
Intended something sinister,
And Pashas hastened to confer
 On that hypothesis ;
Stout souls, they felt prepared to cope
With stratagems within their scope,
 But, Allah, what was this ?

Far down the lines the Faithful heard
And had no notion what occurred,
But plied their triggers undeterred
 By trifles such as that ;
From sea to sea the tumult spread,
Nor could a single man have said
 What he was shooting at.

Then spoke the guns, and gave it hot
To the offensive choric spot
Where we, who shrank from being shot,
 Had long since ceased to be ;
And even Asiatic Anne
Disgorge a bolt of monstrous plan,
 Which fell into the sea.

TWITTING THE TURK—II.

I would that night Byzantium
Had been at hand to hear the hum
And count the cost, a fearful sum,
Of so much S.A.A.,
For no one but the Moslem knows
The way the ammunition goes
When he is on his day.

And what of those whose mad caprice
Had frightened half the Chersonese?
Did they, repentant, know no peace,
And when at dawn there crept
A sheepish hush o'er crag and glen,
Pray that they might be better men?
Instead of that they slept.

And a dispatch in pleasing wise,
Spoke of a 'daring enterprise
Against some enemy supplies,'
Adding this tragic note :—
'The casualties of the force
Were sixty men extremely hoarse
And one severe sore throat.'

On 'Standing to'

NO it is not the hour before the battle,
 (Though then, indeed, I am not at my best)
Nor when at eve the Moslem's muskets rattle
 And goodness knows what wiles are in his breast,
 Nor when all day one builds some earthly wall
 And huge Staff officers, absurdly tall,
 Come up and say 'This parapet's too small'—
 That I am most depressed.

But when, at dawn, ere over Asia's margins
 Phoebus prepares to advertise his charms,
With no excitement, with no Turks for targes,
 With none of war's legitimate alarms,
 None of the fire that fills the soldier's face
 When it appears that *something* must take
 place
 (Though more than likely it is not the case)—
 We sadly stand to arms.

Now when the citizen in England's couches
 Turns yawning over and renews his snore,
We wake with cramp, and grimly pat our pouches,
 And I go forth to tramp the trenchéd floor.
 To squeeze and stumble in Tartarean tracks,
 Past bulging men and elephantine packs,
 To tread on toes and talk about attacks,
 And be a general bore.

ON 'STANDING TO'

It's very cold, and I cannot find my 'webbing,'
And in the night my pipe has taken wing;
Some soured battalion, in its midnight ebbing,
Came surging past and pinched the precious thing.
There is no light, save Southward in the bay,
A Red Cross vessel with a long green ray,
And on the parados two glow worms play.
I wonder if they sting.

Yonder the Turk is quiet in his caverns
But I suppose he too is standing by,
With wistful visionings of Stamboul taverns,
And sometimes swears and sometimes winks an
eye,
For he like us is painfully aware
That neither host is like to leave his lair
Yet all stand vigilant and full of care—
And no one quite knows why.

But there's a tale some Red-Hats set the fashion,
That found the firing-line one fateful night,
Whereat the foe, with pardonable passion;
Disbursed a bomb within their very sight;
And they, indignant at a stroke so rare,
Supposed some special peril in the air
At this dim period, and then and there
Arranged this dismal rite.

ON 'STANDING TO'

But do they share our grim nocturnal orgies?
Do batmen call them when the moon is low,
In yon soft nests behind these fatal gorges,
To prime their pistols and expect the foe?
Or are they seen before the stars have set
For ever peering o'er the parapet?
It may be so. I never saw it yet,
But still— it *may* be so.

Rum

THERE is a nectar, not distilled
Where England's gods and princes come,
Rather by men of meaner build
In needy streets is sometimes swilled
At no excessive sum ;
But here I deem it no disgrace,
When Sol sits down in Samothrace
And Father Achi hides his face,
To fill my flask with rum.

In this hushed hour the peasant Turk,
The other side of yonder steep,
Walks home, I ween, from vineyard work
Through rock-strewn scrub where lizards lurk
And snakes are going cheap,
To where in some deep-delv'd cell
His best Falernian goat-skins dwell,
And does himself extremely well
And settles down to sleep.

But it is now, when peasants play,
That soldiers' toils in truth begin ;
We may do nothing all the day
But feebly wave the flies away
And let the best fly win ;

RUM

But with the dark arrive our rigours,
The bags, the bombs, the ceaseless diggers,
While foemen madly work their triggers—
And that's where rum comes in.

It cheers me when the night is chill,
Or things particularly grave,
When only one lone sentry still
Is wakeful and prepared to kill
If Moslems misbehave ;
Or, while I crawl where no trench is
And spiteful missiles round me whizz
From someone in those cypresses,
It makes me almost brave.

And when I wake from some brief doze
To hear the great Red-Hats have writ
That they have reason to suppose
This is the night our frantic foes
Intend to do their bit ;
And we sad souls till dawn must act
Like men about to be attacked,
And not a thing occurs, in fact—
I shall be glad of it.

RUM

Deliberate now my tot I raise
And take it gingerly, like snuff,
Not with the wild convivial ways,
The deep long draughts of Oxford days ;
It is not good enough ;
For, though in kindly terms I touch
On this rich stimulant, as such,
I cannot say I like it much,
Indeed I hate the stuff.

Digging

A SONG OF THE SPADE.

With apologies to the Shade of Thomas Hood.

WITH heavy, sleepless eyes,
With faces starved and drawn,
Some soldiers stood in a dreary ditch
And dug before the dawn :
Dig—dig—dig,
And round the barricade,
While the bull-frogs croaked in the gully-bed
And the 'strays' went whispering overhead,
They sang the Song of the Spade.

Dig—dig—dig,
With every finger frayed,
Dig—dig—dig,
For so are Empires made.
Why did we leave the Tyne,
Where men were fairly paid,
If no one fights in the fighting-line
But only drives a Spade?

Dig—dig—dig,
Ever a job to do.
The mules must walk in a covered track,
'The officer' needs a nice new shack,

DIGGING

The parapet here is much too thin,
The General's roof is falling in,
And somebody wants a hundred men
Up the gully to-night at ten
And a hundred more at two.

Dig—dig—dig,
And underneath the stones,
Dig—dig—dig,
You find a Frenchman's bones.
Pick and shovel and sand,
Shovel and sand and pick,
Cover him there for a little yet,
Man must sleep where his tomb is set.
Quick, lad, cover him quick.

Dig—dig—dig,
But turn some other sod.
Leave him asleep where the maggots creep
And an Army's feet have trod ;
But Oh, the awful smell !
To think a thing so vile
Went forth to war with a soldier's smile
And wore the form of God !

DIGGING

Dig—dig—dig,
Dig in the dark out there.
Less noise somebody ! God, what's that?
Only the feet of a frightened rat.
Dig, and be done before the moon.
Dig, for the Turk will spot you soon !
Lie down, you fools, a flare !

Dig—dig—dig,
One of the section dead.
Dig—dig—dig,
For we must make his bed :
Pick and shovel and sand,
Shovel and sand and pick,
Oh, God, to think it was for this,
I learned the pitman's trick !

He was a mate of mine,
And only yesterday
We talked together about the Tyne
We bathed in Marto Bay.
Dig—dig—dig,
Deep and narrow and neat,
And I must write to a Tyneside town
To say in a ditch we laid him down
At the back of Mercer Street.

DIGGING

Dig—dig—dig,
With the cramp upon my chest,
Dig—dig—dig,
And this is how we 'rest.'

Oh, for a long, long sleep !

Oh, for a night at ease !

Oh, women, you think of a thousand fights,
But the sullen toil and the sleepless nights,
The filthy tasks and the sickly sights—

Say, do you think of these?

* * * *

With heavy sleepless eyes,
With faces starved and drawn,
Some soldiers stood in a dreary ditch
And dug before the dawn.
Dig—dig—dig,
And round the barricade,
While the bull-frogs croaked in the gully-bed
And the 'strays' went whimpering overhead,
They sang this Song of the Spade.

To James

(On his Appointment to the Staff)

IT does not make me laugh and whoop
 (Though certainly the choice *is* droll)
To hear that you are asked to stoop
To join that great malignant group ;
 I hasten to condole.
Not for your frame I fear—ah, no,
For, far as creature comforts go,
They lack but little here below :
 I shudder for your soul.

I know that when the seas are rude
 And people's parcels long delayed,
No hint of trouble shall intrude
Where your select and frequent food
 Is delicately laid ;
That, though the sweet Imbrosial hens
Abruptly perish in their pens,
Your eggs will not, like other men's,
 Be absent from parade.

I know the neighbourhood is rich
 In sandbagged shelters, cutely packed,
Yet if there be some special niche,
The perfect kind of cranny which
 We hitherto have lacked,

TO JAMES

Where man may shun the shells of man
(And also Asiatic Anne),
'Twill be but part of some huge plan
For keeping you intact.

I fear for you no foeman's knife,
But fear to see on that fresh face
The lofty look of one whose life
Is quite remote from earthly strife
(Though that will be the case);
I dread the perilous abyss
Of being *sui generis*,
And looking with some prejudice
On any other race.

I fear, yet hope, that after all,
If e'er you tread, supremely vast,
The lowly drain wherein we crawl,
You'll have the kindness to recall
Some fragment of the past;
For some wee while confess the sin
Of merely earthly origin,
And not refuse a genial grin
For fear of losing caste.

The Bathe

COME friend and swim. We may be better then
But here the dust blows ever in the eyes
And wrangling round are weary fevered men,
For ever mad with flies.
I cannot sleep, nor even long lie still,
And you have read your April paper twice ;
To-morrow we must stagger up the hill
To man a trench and live among the lice.

But yonder, where the Indians have their goats,
There is a rock stands sheer above the blue,
Where one may sit and count the bustling boats
And breath the cool air through ;
May find it still is good to be alive,
May look across and see the Trojan shore
Twinkling and warm, may strip, and stretch, and div
And for a space forget about the war.

Then will we sit and talk of happy things,
Home and ' the High ' and some far fighting friend
And gather strength for what the morrow brings,
For that may be the end.
It may be we shall never swim again,
Never be clean and comely to the sight,
May rot untombed and stink with all the slain.
Come, then and swim. Come and be clean
to-night.

The Dud

A TURKISH shell. Not beautiful, but still,
It has a history. So here goes.
In some hot factory in far Stamboul
They made the missile, and exalted dames,
Ill-used to toil and reverently veiled,
But volunteering for munition work,
Fingered it lovingly and packed it up
And sent it southward in a little ship :
And she, though timidly, adventured on,
With due respect for heathen submarines,
Across the Marmora and down the Straits ;
And at Chanak they bundled it ashore.

There was a gun then—and, it may be now,—
Towards Kum Kale, by the plain of Troy,
By impious men called Asiatic Annie,
Just to distinguish it from those vile engines
Which ' hated ' on the European side ;
So that a soldier, though he took great pains,
Might get his death from either continent
(Or maybe both), and in the hours of hate,
Discreetly sheltering in some cute cranny,
Might mock defiance at the guns of Europe
But all the time be much exposed to Asia—
And *vice versa* ; or in sheer despair
Of shunning this bi-continental strife
Roamed in the open, and a bolt from Asia

THE DUD

Blew him into the middle of next week,
Till one from Europe blew him back again ;
It was confusing. And on the quiet eves,
When the rude soldiery came down to swim
Out in the Hellespont by half-platoons,
The wrathful ministers of Asia's Annie,
Would nurse their hatred till the infidels
Had shed their garments and defenceless trod
With delicacy through the slippery snags,
Half in, half not in ; and they then indulged
In one colossal and delicious ' strafe ' :
For it amused them, I suppose, to see
The pride and bulwark of the British Empire,
With coal-black warriors from Senegal,
In piebald mass emerging from the sea
And with fierce gestures scuttling for the rocks,
Like crabs before the shrimper.

But enough :

This shell was sent to Asiatic Annie ;
And one hot evening, when the sun was down,
The daily hate was finished, and the camps
Lay hushed and drowsy on the Chersonnese,
An idle whim inflamed the officer
In charge of Annie ; and he roused his crew,
And, hissing, told them they must hate again.
And they, indignantly, despatched at once
A monstrous bolt across the Hellespont,
Which fell abruptly in the Nelson lines

THE DUD

And couched there quivering. *But it did not burst.*
And while men marvelled at its decadence,
A second portent, with a solemn thud,
Like some old drunkard fell into a dug-out,
An empty dug-out. *But it did not burst,*
And after them yet other sibilants
With hideous instancy disturbed the mules
But swooped innocuous—and *did not burst*;
Till now, as when at some great football match
The back, or goalie, or whoe'er it is
That kicks the leather when it goes behind,
Boots it with vigour, but a tempest blows
And the rude ball flies madly into touch :
It may be that the thing provokes no comment,
But if a second time and then again
The hapless wretch repeats the incident,
Some evil humour in the populace
Moves them to mockery, and at each offence
With growing hoots they irritate the man—
So it was here : for these successive shards,
In harmless pomp descending on the soil,
Caused some excitement, and the men woke up
And waited tensely for the visitors,
While swelling murmurs rippled round the lines
At each fiasco : and financiers
Betted against a burst. And, when the tenth
Proclaimed its onset, and with one wild shriek,
As if complaining of its impotence,

THE DUD

Interred itself beneath an olive-tree,
But did not burst, from fifty thousand holes
The exultant army, in its *déshabille*,
Leaped forth derisively, and cheered, and cheered,
With mocking gestures. Agéd Generals
Croaked in their sleeping bags; and it is said
That two Staff Officers were seen to smile,
Aloofly in the darkness. And the Fleet
Heard the wild uproar and were confident
Of some great victory, while the startled Turk
Roused his reserves and sadly stood to arms.
Far off in Asia, by the plain of Troy,
The sound of shouting reached the officer
In charge of Annie, not immense in volume,
But palpably irreverent in tone.
He with some petulance dismissed his crew,
And so to bed.

And this great cylinder,
This was the last of those unhappy duds;
It never burst: and, now, it never will.
For my aunt Jane has hung it in the hall,
And as you see it makes a goodish gong.

In Reserve

(June 4th and Similar Days)

I CANNOT say I love the battle
Or in it much expect to shine ;
Calm fields and very peaceful cattle
Are rather in the minstrel's line.
But even strife is better in a way,
Less dubious, less numbing to the nerve,
Than sweating sadly in the sun all day
In Army Corps Reserve.

Happy the sentry at his station,
The bomber in the trench's trough,
The gunner filled with wild elation
At seeing all his guns go off :
We only have no tasks to save our face,
We only sit uncomfortably still,
We only wait for something to take place—
Yet hope that nothing will.

For 'mid the doubt and sore distraction
One only thing is fairly sure ;
If we are forced to take some action,
We'll have no sinecure :
No easy task, no soft and cushy bourne
Will be our lot—and this is why we chafe,—
But some wild venture, probably forlorn
And certainly unsafe.

IN RESERVE

We are, in fact,—and should be flattered—
The last resource the General's got ;
When everybody else is battered
He'll send us to relieve the lot ;
And even now he broods before his map
(Where we are represented by a pin),
Trying to make his mind up, poor old chap,
Whether to drag us in.

Meanwhile, we wait. The noise increases,
But no one knows what's going on.
They've made us pack our nice valises,
And we have nought to sit upon.
There is no mail. The flies are worse I think :
The whirling dust makes mummies of us all ;
The sun stares always. I should like a drink.
This tree is much too small.

In short, I feel the situation's
About as grave as it could be.
I only hope the Smaller Nations
Will show their gratitude to me.
And when at last we get the clarion call,
And seize our hyp and bustle up the slope,
And, in the end, do nothing after all,
They will be pleased, I hope.

Through the Gate of Horn

(*A quite Imaginary Misfortune*)

I N that dark hour before the dawn comes thronging,
When people die and soldiers stand to arms,
I lay and wrestled with a wicked longing
To yield ungrudgingly to Lethe's charms.
I weighed it well; for in Battalion Orders
High powers had registered their awful aim :—
All subalterns to be unwinking warders
Throughout that period. But all the same
There are some times one simply has to keep
For certain things. This was the time for sleep.

I said, ' There stands a great unwrit tradition,
Which kills off Colonels and makes Generals grey,
That none who holds His Majesty's Commission
Shall nod by night or be at rest by day ;
But in this middle time, when all is quiet,
When shells are silent and no flies intrude,
When no sun scorches and no rifles riot,
And even my platoon requires no food,
Shall I not slumber and the King forgive?
The answer is in the affirmative.

' And, if the Staff suspects the man VON SANDERS
Of swift offences and the use of gas,
I might remind them we are not in Flanders
(Where one, it seems, may be that sort of ass),

THROUGH THE GATE OF HORN

But nigh to Troy, where men employed no vapours
Nor made attacks at this unnatural time,
And Troy's traditions shall forbid such capers
While cultured Turks possess the classic clime :
These haunts of chivalry shall still condemn
The least activity at three A.M.'

But anyhow, I slept. And then like thunder
Big clouds of battle burst about my head.
Methought a sentry made some hideous blunder ;
The Turk came creeping and the ground was dead ;
Soft over Dardanus the sun stood staring ;
On Achi Baba paled the startled moon,
When Islam's gallantest, with sounds like swearing,
Drove back the pagans of the tenth platoon.
A man called Ismail, in dirty blue,
Stood kicking me. I woke—*and it was true.*

The time is tedious in Constantinople ;
Meanwhile I pen this melancholy screed
To friendly neutrals, and perhaps the POPE'll
Be touched and intervene and have me freed.
Haply my lines, like some distressful pennant,
Shall flutter forth to that embattled Strait
And reach and teach some drowsy Sub-Lieutenant
To be more dutiful. At any rate
The British fleet will know that I am there,
And not bombard without the greatest care.

The Paralysis of the Tenth Platoon

(A Tragedy of Trench Warfare)

STOUT miners all, their ardour knew no check
While forth we fared upon our warward way ;
They wrote long letters from the ship's safe deck,
Behind the boom of some Ægean Bay
(Breathing the hot inflammatory soul
Which comes, it seems, from always carving coal),
Of how they heard the hideous cannon's roll,
And many a vivid but invented fray.

And when we sought the catacombs of strife
The lust for slaughter yet illumed their eyes ;
On the way up they nearly took the life
Of two black braves from Afric (our Allies) ;
They longed to leap from out the sandbag's screen,
And in close combat satisfy their spleen ;
While I, who, truth to tell, was not so keen,
Hardly persuaded them it was not wise.

The slow days travelled, and no blood was drawn,
Yet long their hearts were lionlike and large,
For oft we woke them, on the cool still dawn,
To arm and hasten to the battle's marge,
And braced them up for some tremendous bout,
And when, of course, the General washed it out,
We said to-morrow would supply, no doubt,
Their fearful wish to make (or break) a charge.

THE PARALYSIS OF THE TENTH PLATOON

Then, like a terrier too often spurred
To 'seek' the quite imaginary rat,
Darting, all eager, at the lying word
With busy sniffs where never a rodent sat,
Till a vile doubt affects the brute with gall,
That it may be there are no rats at all,
And heedless now he hears his master's call,
But sits and wonders what he's getting at—

A dark distrust encompassed my platoon;
Bored and incredulous they lie and brood;
I say it's Ramadan, the sacred moon,
When pious foes are likely to intrude;
Night after night I venture to aver
That something still may possibly occur;
They hear me sweetly, but they think I err,
And on the parados prepare their food.

I know not if indeed the gleam is gone
That did inflame this melancholy crew,
Or if deep down some ember carries on,
And, when at last the Turk comes creeping through,
As some old golfer, once considered warm,
Is deadliest yet where thick the hazards swarm,
They in a flash may find their ancient form—
But Allah help the Faithful if they do!

The School for Saints

IS there a man can think that Europe's quarrels
Are barren bickerings and do no good?
There may be such; but let him see
The way in which Gallipoli
Affects young officers and moulds their morals,
And blow me if he could !

What kindness, what self-sacrifice was present
In that most painful of Peninsulæ,
If several of the eggs were tired,
Or some drab services required !
It was a joy to see how nice and pleasant
A Cambridge man could be.

With never a moan we munched the meanest ration,
We that of late were full of pelf and pride ;
Swore not at all when privates erred
(Though Simpson said a *shocking* word),
And no one published, in pre-bellum fashion,
The state of his inside.

Moreover, we were bent on being fully
The same sweet gentry, men of model mood,
When parted from the scenes of strife
(If ever). We should laugh through life,
And never, through the bitterness of ' bully,'
Complain about our food.

THE SCHOOL FOR SAINTS

But it was vain ; the soul is bound to stumble
When peace and plenteousness succeed the storm.
Each morning I become less kind ;
To-day I had some fault to find
With Cook's fair fish-cakes, and they say I grumble
Quite in my ancient form.

Therefore with joy I'd hie me back to-morrow
To Turks and centipedes and all the pain ;
I do not deem, as some have done,
That, on the whole, it's ' rather fun ' ;
The life is vile. But this would ease my sorrow—
I should be good again.

The Parcel

HAPPLY in some slow labouring hulk it rested,
That fairy freight of which my wife had writ,
Or sunken lay, by curious fish infested,
Where the sly submarine had done its bit,
Or some rude soldier by the busy shore
Forsaken found it, and disgraced his corps,
Knew not the kind of fellow it was for
But sipped its sweets, and intercepted it—

For it was late. And when I guessed its glories,
The billowing natal cake, by secret code
Fashioned and decked in Cook's laboratories,
With snowy shells and chocolate cannon strowed;
And precious fruits and tawny cattle-tongue
(Alas, now mute); with smokes from Afric sprung
(And o'er them all the scent of home is hung,
The inimitable scent of Argyle road),

Like some great General whose harassed forces
Are short of shells or bayonets or rum.
I mooned o'er maps and traced the deep-sea courses
And where torpedoes might be troublesome,
Or like some Tyrian trader paced the cliff
That seaward sought the merry Grecian skiff,
Knowing his business would be busted if
Shy traffickers, his clients did not come.

THE PARCEL

In vain they sought to soften the position,
Insisting, 'There is nothing for you, Sir,
But forty thousand rounds of ammunition
Have just come in'; for me it made no stir :
To souls who sojourn in the SULTAN'S land
And know no sustenance that is not 'canned,'
It's good, of course, to see the maxims manned,
But one small parcel is much jollier.

And then it came. But, ere the sun was hidden,
I left, alack, the now attractive scene,
And here in hospital, where food's forbidden
And only the white milk is sometimes seen,
In a far camp beneath the Eastern stars
I seem to see *my* cakes and *my* cigars
Consumed, consumed by Simpson ! and it jars.
I like to think how ill he must have been.

The Hazards of Home

THEY said. ' You will not mind the Zeppelin
Who know so well the sound of iron shards ;
You will not blench when breakages begin
Who stood to battle with the SULTAN'S GUARDS.'

But they were wrong. And when the guns went off,
And undeterred the sausages came on,
While gay civilians bustled out to scoff
And happy crowds occurred in Kensington,

I said, ' For these intrepid citizens
It's well enough to carry on like this ;
They view through habit's minimising lens
The menaced doom of their Metropolis ;

' But to an officer who only knows
The milder dangers of the Dardanelles,
It is too evident that foes are foes,
And these old bombs much worse than many shells.

' Shells are so sensible, for from afar,
Shrill sibilants, they make their onset plain ;
You hop into a hole, and there you are
(And there, indeed, you probably remain) ;

THE HAZARDS OF HOME

‘ While here, it seems, with mute ungoverned sweeps
Rude bolts in ’buses bruise you unaware,
Or, at the least, unpulverised one creeps
Home to his house—to find it is not there.

‘ I liked the Turk’s humane terrestrial bomb,
Which decent cricketers would catch with ease,
And hurtle back with cover-point’s aplomb;
I should not like to try it on with these.

‘ I am no coward ; but the days are done
When English soldiers perished in a square ;
And here I cannot even hurt the Hun ;
I think I should be happier elsewhere.

‘ And when it’s whispered that the gasbag brings
To many a mild unmilitary clod
A sudden zeal to join the strife of Kings—
The news is nice, but it is scarcely odd.

‘ Blessed, indeed, I deem the soldier’s lot
In happier hazards far across the foam ;
I doff my hat to those who seize it not,
The staunch dare-devil souls who stay at home.’

The Illusion

THE nicest of the nurses
According her consent,
I made some simple verses
To tell her what I meant,
That in this best of bowers,
Where milk descends in showers,
And no one heeds the powers,
I am not quite content.

Although my martial fervour
Is subject to caprice
No competent observer
Will grudge me my release ;
I may occasion no stir
But feel a modest boaster
(To paraphrase the poster),
That I've performed my piece.

In practical phylactics
I've done some useful work ;
I've taught the men some tactics
And where bacilli lurk ;
But always on reflection,
I note one grave objection—
That (to my recollection)
I never killed a Turk.

THE ILLUSION

With Private Kent, the sniper,
I've done some prodigies ;
I spot a Turkish viper
And tell him where it is ;
Though mine the primal vigour
To indicate the figure,
The hand that pressed the trigger
Was uniformly his.

Perhaps, to be quite candid.
I'm not cut out for CAIN ;
I slaughter—second-handed,
I fire the distant train ;
My influence in the trenches
May well compare with FRENCH'S,
But never a maiden blenches
To know that I have slain.

All this impairs my pleasure,
As poets hate to see
Some almost perfect measure
Not *quite* what it should be ;
Yet have I consolation
For having failed the nation—
By some miscalculation
They never finished me.

THE ILLUSION

From experts' truthful stories
I do my best to learn ;
They all agree that war is
A murdering concern ;
And since it seems my presence
Adds nothing to its essence,
I feel a mere excrescence
And simply shan't return.

Some Reflections on the Evacuation

ONCE more sits Mahomet by Helles' marges
And smokes with ease among his cypress-trees,
Nor snipes from scrubberies at British targes
Nor views them wallowing in sacred seas,
But cleans his side arms and is pleased to prattle
Of that great morning when he woke and heard
That in his slumbers he had fought a battle,
A bloody battle, and a little bird
Piped (in the German) at his side, and said,
'The something infidels have been and fled.'

Cautious he crept from out his mountain-ditches,
Down the long gully, past the Water Towers;
By Backhouse Point he nosed among the niches,
But they were hushed, and innocent of Giaours;
Still fearful found the earthly homes we haunted,
Those thirsty stretches where the rest-camps were,
Then the sea slunk on, a trifle daunted
By wreathéd wires and every sort of snare,
And came at last, incredulous, to find
The very beach all blasphemously mined.

Now on each hand he eyes our impious labels,
BOND STREET and REGENT STREET, those weary ways;
Here stands the PINK FARM, with the broken gables,
Here OXFORD CIRCUS marks a winding maze;

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EVACUATION

But most, I ween, in scarred grave-ridden regions,
O'er many a battle-scene he loves to brood,
How Allah here was gracious to his legions,
How here, again, he was not quite so good,
Here by the BROWN HOUSE, when the bombs began,
And they—I whisper it—they turned and ran.

And we shall no more see the great ships gather,
Nor hear their thunderings on days of state,
Nor toil from trenches in a honest lather
To magic swimmings in a perfect Strait ;
Nor sip Greek wine and see the slow sun dropping
On gorgeous evenings over Imbros' Isle,
While up the hill the maxim will keep popping,
And the men sing, and camp-fires wink awhile
And in the scrub the glow-worms glow like stars,
But (hopeless creatures) will not light cigars ;

Nor daylong linger in our delvéd lodges,
And fight for food with fifty thousand flies,
Too sick and sore to be afraid of ' proj's,'
Too dazed with dust to see the turquoise skies ;
Nor walk at even by the busy beaches,
Or quiet cliff-paths where the Indians pray,
And see the sweepers in the sky-blue reaches
Of Troy's own water, where the Greek ships lay,
And touch the boat-hulks, where they float forlorn,
The wounded boats of that first April morn ;

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EVACUATION

Nor wake unhappily to see the sun come
And stand to arms in some Cimmerian grot—
But I, in town, well rid of all that bunkum,
I like to think that Mahomet is not ;
He must sit on, now sweltering, now frozen,
By draughty cliff and many a mountain holt,
And, when rude fears afflict the prophet's chosen,
Gird on his arms and madly work his bolt,
While from the heights the awful whispers run,
'Herbert the bard is landing with his gun.'

The Dug-Out

(A Memory of Gallipoli)

IT was my home, not ringed with roses blowing,
Nor set in meadows where cool waters croon;
Parched wastes were round it, and no shade was going,
Nor breath of violets nor song-birds' tune;
Only at times from the adjacent dwelling
Came down with Boreas the quaint, compelling
Scent of the Tenth Platoon.

And there not hermit-like I brooded,
But ant and lizard and all things that crawl
With great grasshoppers by brigades intruded;
Therein the tortoise had his nightly stall;
Green flies and blue slept nightly in their notches
Save when a serpent in the middle watches,
Came and disturbed us all.

There, where the sun, the senseless sun, kept pouring,
And dust-clouds smothered one about the chest,
While secret waters filtered through the flooring
(In case the heat should leave one *too* oppressed),
Always I lay in those sad fevered seasons
Which Red-Hat humourists, for mystic reasons,
Regarded as our 'rest.'

THE DUG-OUT

For it was home ; and when I was not in it,
But in the trenches, it was home indeed ;
When mad foes fired at twenty rounds a minute
(Not, I may say, the regulation speed),
For me far more it harboured my Penates ;
I missed my animals ; I missed my gay teas
With Alf, the centipede,

And I am shocked to think that that same ceiling
Shields now some Mussulman of lowly strain ;
Yet though he knows me not, I can't help feeling
That something of my spirit must remain,
And if, in that rich air the man should mellow
In mind, in soul, and be a better fellow,
I have not lived in vain.

And it may be, when worlds have ceased to wrestle,
I shall go back across the midland foam
At special rates in some large tourist vessel
To my late hollow in the SULTAN's loam,
And their clasp hands with that uplifted warrior,
Compare brief notes and wonder which was sorrier
To have to call it home.

‘Cold Feet’

WHEN in the Mess we chatter round the clock,
And bold young blades some idle talk repeat
With obvious relish but an air of shock,
That Smith or somebody ‘has got cold feet.’
I wonder what exactly is
This pest of the extremities,
And whether mine, perhaps, like his,
Are not the proper heat.

For if it means the fellow shrinks from shells
And little loves to see his comrades bleed,
Has learned too well the way a dead man smells,
And in what pasturage the green flies feed.
Or that he feels he’d like to cry
When tons of lead go tumbling by,
And, frankly, does not want to die.—
My feet are cold indeed.

And if it means he does not like the dark,
When tired men slumber and the trench is stilled,
When it is his to pace, and peep, and hark,
And he has time to think of being killed.
Of tangled wire that tears and twines,
Of mangling bombs and leaping mines,
Of getting left between the lines,—
My feet are fairly chilled.

‘ COLD FEET ’

Or if he has no taste for sleeping out,
For lice and maggots in his bed begot,
For bucket-washes, and the gnawing doubt
If dinner will occur to-day, or not,
But loves a life of ordered ease,
Not dust, not digging, not disease,
Not sunstruck eyes and palsied knees,—
My feet are far from hot.

Or if it means that blood is in his dreams,
And shattered jaws and heads precisely holed,
And quiet midnights shot with sudden screams,
And snatched Field Dressings, ne’er to be un-
rolled,
Or that at times he wakes in tears
With ‘ Stretcher-Bearers ’ ! in his ears,
And knows those stretchers will be biers,—
Ah me, my feet are cold.

But if it means he does not in his soul,
Whatever filthiness the fight may send,
Whate’er the torment and whate’er the toll,
Long to go back and be beside his friend,
But, knowing all, would liefer lurk
In some soft specious Barrack work,
Than see it out with Johnny Turk,—
My feet do not offend.

DEPÔT[^] DAYS

The Quartermaster

(A Word of Advice to New Officers)

HOW delicate must be the young man's dealings
With those who hold the regimental reins;
How sensitive he finds the Major's feelings,
How constantly the Adjutant complains;
Yet any youth of reasonable phlegm
Should be at ease with some at least of them,
But, mind you, there is only one Q.M.,
And he, I think, requires the greatest pains.

For he provides his own peculiar terrors,
His own pet penalties, his special scores;
He little recks your mere strategic errors,
He marks unmoved the feeblest kind of fours;
'Tis naught to him how Private Thompson shoots,
Only he must not wear civilian boots;
And all the officers may act like brutes
If they commit no sin against the Stores.

Then, like the octopus, that all day dallies
In loathly caverns, loving not the sun,
Till prying trespassers provoke his sallies,
He waddles forth to give the culprit one;
Unrolls, like tentacles, by fold and pleat,
Some hoary form, some long-forgot receipt,
And stamps the fellow liar, thief and cheat—
There is no argument; the man is done.

THE QUARTERMASTER

And evermore, however slight the caper,
His name, his credit in the Stores is black ;
If he but supplicate for emery-paper,
Or seek small articles his soldiers lack,
He will be lucky if they fail to look
His record up in some avenging book,
And say, ' I thought as much—the man who took
A bar of soap and never brought it back.'

Be careful, then, and court the man's compassion ;
Note how the gods, in old Olympian years,
Would woo Hephaestus's, that used to fashion
Stout shields and suchlike for his godly peers ;
How upstart deities, who feared not Zeus
And gave Peseidon something like abuse,
Approached him sweetly and were quite profuse,
Lest he be cross and serve them out no spears.

Nor in the trenches shall your tact diminish,
For there, still stern with casual issue notes,
He will determine when the food must finish,
And stint his rum to undeserving throats ;
And what if in some struggle he should say,
' Look here, this battle can't go on to-day ;
You'll get no hand-grenades, no S.A.A.,
Till Simpson signs for all these overcoats ' ?

The Old Soldier

(By a 'Temporary' Sub.)

THERE are some men—and such is Jones—
Who love to vent their antique spleens
On any subaltern that owns
He's not a soldier in his bones
 (I'm not by any means);
Who fiercely watch us drill our men
And tell us things were different when
(In, I imagine, 1810)
 They joined the Blue Marines.

I like them not, yet I effect
 That air of awed humility
Which I should certainly expect,
If I were old and medal-deck'd,
 From young men under me;
But when they hint their wondrous wit
Is what has made them feel so fit
To do their military bit,
 I simply can't agree.

I said to Jones—or should have said
 But feared the Articles of War—
'You must not think you have a head
Because you know from A to Z
 This military lore,

THE OLD SOLDIER

By years of study slowly gat
(And somewhat out-of-date at that),
When lo, I had the whole thing pat
 In six small months—not more.'

Maybe the mystic art appals
 Unlearned souls of low degrees,
But men to whom the high Muse calls,
Men who are good enough for Smalls,
 Imbibe it all with ease ;
While where would Jones, I wonder, be
If someone took the man for me
And asked him for some *jeu d'esprit*,
 A few bright lines (like these)?

Possibly Jones will one day tire
 Of fours and fights and iron shards,
Will seize his pencil and aspire
To court the Muse and match the fire
 Of us poetic cards ;
Then I shall mock his meagre strain
And gaily make the moral plain,
How barren is the soldier's brain
 Compared with any bard's.

The Adjutant

I N that great room which military error
Has miscalled Orderly (for it is not,
But full of tumult and debate and terror,
And worried writers growing rather hot,
For ever floundering in seas of chits
And forms and counterfoils and wrathful writs),
Alone unfevered mid the storm he sits
And tells them all exactly what is what.

Who so alert to solve the frequent riddle,
To judge if Jones should have his train-fare free,
Whether the bard requires another fiddle,
And which is senior, Robinson or me?
Who shall indite such circulars as his
To Officers Commanding Companies
About their musketry, or why it is
So many men take sugar in their tea?

And when at times he shuns the sacred table
And like some eagle swoops upon parade,
Men mark his coming and there bursts a babel
As with new zeal the subalterns upbraid,
Lecture and illustrate, and on the right
Form sullen squads, and hope they're being bright—
Save those white-livered ones who at the sight
Hide their commands in some convenient glade.

THE ADJUTANT

For he is terrible ; and few folk relish
The words of doom which shake his diaphragm ;
Yet is the heart of him not wholly hellish,
But in his playing-hours he's like a lamb ;
And who'd have said that one so skilled to strafe
And, when I err, too truculent by half,
Could own so rich, so rollicking a laugh,
Would see so well how humorous I am ?

Yet if unlicensed I quit the barrack,
Ever behind I dread that he will call,
Speed up the street in some avenging Darracq
Or on the underground retrieve his thrall ;
Nor in my home can I escape the spell
But freeze with horror at the front door-bell,
For fear the parlour-maid may speak my knell
May knock and say that *he* is in the hall.

And, sleeping, still I brook his blusters ;
A monstrous adjutant is always nigh
At dream-reviews and endless dreamy musters,
Laden with lists and schemes and syllabi ;
And, though he find no failing anywhere,
But all are present and correct and fair,
I never fail to make the fellow swear,
I always seem to catch his horrid eye.

The Soldier's Spring

ON stormy days I get quite warlike ;
I find it easy to be fierce
In winter, when the land is more like
The Arctic Pole, with winds that pierce ;
With James for foe and all the meadows mired
I feel in concord with the wildest plan,
And grudge no effort that may be required
To enfilade the man.

But now how hard, when Spring is active,
To utter anything but purrs ;
With all the hillside so attractive
How can one concentrate on ' spurs ' ?
And how I sympathise with that young scout
Whom anxious folk sent forth to spy the foe,
But he came back and cried, '*The lilac's out !*
And that is all I know.'

They ask me things about my picket,
And whether I'm in touch with whom ;
I want to lie in yonder thicket,
I only wish to touch the bloom ;
And when men agitate about their flanks
And say their left is sadly in the air,
I hear the missel-thrush and murmur, ' Thanks,
I wish that I was there.'

THE SOLDIER'S SPRING

When we extend and crawl in grim rows,
I want to stray and wander free ;
I deviate to pluck a primrose,
I stay behind to watch a bee ;
Nor have the heart to keep the men in line,
When some have lingered where the squirrels leap.
And some are busy by the eglantine,
And some are sound asleep.

And always I am filled with presage
That, some fair noon of balmy airs,
I shall indite a rude Field Message
If Colonels pry in my affairs ;
Shall tell them simply, ' It is early May,
And here the daffodils are almost old ;
About that sentry-group I cannot say—
In fact it leaves me cold.'

But, strange, I do not think the enemy
In Spring-tide on the Chersonnese
Was any whit less vile or venomy
When all the heavens whispered Peace ;
Though wild birds babbled in the cypress dim,
And through thick fern the drowsy lizards stole,
It never had the least effect on him—
He can't have had a soul.

The Draft

SO it is done—the calling and the counting,
The solemn mustering, the ritual care,
The fevered messages, the tempers mounting
For some old rogue who never can be there ;
No more the Adjutant explodes and splutters
Because the rifles are too few by four ;
No longer now the Quartermaster mutters
It's time that bedding was returned to store ;
But all is ship-shape, and, to cut it fine,
The draft has now departed down the line.

These were the men that we have trained from
tyros ;
We took them in, we dressed them for the wars ;
For us they first arranged themselves in wry rows,
For us they formed their first unlovely fours ;
We taught them cleanliness (by easy stages)
And cursed them daily by platoons and squads,
And they, unmoved by months of mimic rages,
Regarded us—most properly—as gods :
They were our very own and, being such,
For all our blasphemy we loved them much.

But strangers now will have them in their keeping,
Unfeeling folk who understand them ill,
Nor know what energies, what fires unsleeping
Inform the frames that seem so stupid still ;

THE DRAFT

Who'll share their struggles and curtail their slum-
bers,
And get conceited when the men do well,
Nor think of us who brought them up by numbers,
Save in the seasons when they don't excel,
And then they'll say, 'The fellows should be strafed
Whoever trained this blooming awful draft.'

But not the men : they will not slight so early
The mild-eyed masters who reviled them first,
But, mindful still of marches out to Shirley,
Wet walks at Hayes and romps round Chisle-
hurst;
When in some ditch, untroubled yet though thinner,
They talk old days and feelingly refer
Over their bully to the Dépôt dinner,
They'll speak (I hope) about 'the officer,'
And say at least, as Sub-Lieutenants go,
He was the most intelligent they know.

And now is life bereft of half its beauty,
Now the C.O., like some afflicted mare
Whose cherished colts have been detailed for duty,
Paws the parade where late his yearlings were ;

THE DRAFT

We shall not lie with them in East-bound vessels,
Nor see new shores in sunlit sweeper-craft,
Nor (save in soul) be with them in their wrestles,
Nor wear the ribbons that shall deck the draft;
Not in our praise will laureates be loud;
We must turn to and train another crowd.

Eye-wash

WHENE'ER I see some high brass-hatted man
Inspect the Depôt with his ribboned train,
When all seems spick and reasonably span
And no man spits and nothing gives him pain,
I think what blissful ignorance is theirs
Who only see us on inspection days,
And wonder, could they catch us unawares,
Would they be still so eloquent of praise?

They think the soldiers are a cleanly type,
For all their brass is bright with elbow-fat,
Burnished their bayonets and oiled their hyp;
Do they suppose they always look like that?
They see the quarters beautiful and gay,
Yet never realise, with all their lore,
Those bright new beds were issued yesterday
And will to-morrow be returned to store.

They doubtless say, 'Was ever drill so deft?
Were ever rifles so precisely sloped?
Observe that section change direction left
So much, much better than the best we hoped ;'
But little know with what grim enterprise
For week on week that clever-looking crew
Have practised up for their especial eyes
The sole manœuvre they can safely do.

EYE-WASH

And I could tell where many a canker gnaws
 Within the walls they fancy free from sin ;
I know how officers infringe their laws,
 I know the corners where the men climb in ;
I know who broke the woodside fence to bits
 And what platoon attacked the Shirley cow,
While the sad Staff, for all their frantic chits,
 Know not the truth of that distressing row.

These are the things I think they should be taught,
 But, since I know what ages must elapse,
What forms be filled, what signatures be sought,
 Ere I have speech with such exalted chaps,
I here announce that they are much misled,
 That they should see us when we think them far,
Should steal upon us, all unheralded,
 And find what frauds, what awful frauds we are.

The World set free

(An awful prospect).

LONG, long ago, when I had not attested,
I prized the liberties of this proud race,
The right of speech, from haughty rulers wrested,
The right to put one's neighbours in their place;
I like to argue and I loved to pass
Slighting remarks on Robert, who's an ass,
To hint that Henry's manners were no class,
Or simply say I did not like his face.

But things are changed. To-day I had a tussle
With some low scion of an upstart line;
Meagre his intellect, absurd his muscle,
I should have strafed him in the days long syne;
I took a First, and he could hardly parse;
I had more eloquence but he more stars;
Yet (so insane the ordinance of Mars)
I must say 'Yessir,' and salute the swine.

And it was hard when that abrupt Staff-Major
Up to the firing-line one evening came
(Unknown his motive, probably a wager),
And said quite rudely, 'You are much to blame;
Those beggars yonder you should enfilade.'
I fingered longingly a nice grenade;
I said those beggars were our First Brigade,
But might not call him any kind of name.

THE WORLD SET FREE

Yet not for ever shall the bard be muted
By stars and stripes, but freely, as of yore,
When swords are sheathed and I'm civilian-suited,
I shall have speech with certain of my corps,
Speak them the insults which I now but brood :
' Pompous,' ' incompetent,' ' too fond of food,'
And fiercely taste the bliss of being rude
And unrestrained by Articles of War.

That will be great ; but what if such intentions
Are likewise present in the Tenth Platoon ?
What if some labourer of huge dimensions
Meet me defenceless in a Tube saloon,
And hiss his catalogue of unpaid scores,
How oft I criticised his forming fours,
Or prisoned him behind the Dépôt doors,
Or kept him digging on the fourth of June ?

Painful. And then, when all these arméd millions
Unknot with zest the military noose,
Will the whole world be full of wroth civilians,
Each one exulting in a tongue let loose ?
And who shall picture or what bard shall pen
The crowning horror which awaits us then—
That civil warfare of uncivil men
In one great Armageddon of abuse ?

From B. H. Blackwell's List



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